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*TERRY GROSS, host:*

*Rachel DeWoskin's 2005 memoir "Foreign Babes in Beijing" took its title from the Chinese nighttime soap opera she starred in about Western women footloose in the capital city. Her new novel, "Big Girl Small," explores an outsider trying to find her place in another kind of closed world: high school.*

*Book critic Maureen Corrigan has a review.*

*MAUREEN CORRIGAN:*

Don't read this novel if you have teenagers. Or ever were a teenager - especially a teenage girl. It will bring back high school in raw, oozing detail, like a psychic skinned knee. The cliques, the whispers, the glossy girls, the frantic parties, the stupid drinking, the disconnected sexual encounters and, perhaps worst of all, the carnival of lost souls that is the lunchtime cafeteria. High school: a world so hostile to the outsider that even a Navy SEAL might hesitate at the threshold.

There's one compelling reason, however, to ignore my warnings about Rachel DeWoskin's new novel, "Big Girl Small": the voice of her narrator, Judy Lohden. Judy is 16 - a sarcastic, smart, gutsy and thoughtful incarnation of 16 that any parent would be reassured by. In addition to her other strengths, Judy also possesses a Susan Boyle-sized voice, so her loving parents, who own a diner in Ann Arbor, Michigan, scrape up the money to transfer her to the Darcy Arts Academy, a private school for the performing arts. Here is Judy's description of walking into Darcy that first day.

“The halls were bulging with kids hugging each other, throwing books into their lockers, slinging on fashionable backpacks, singing, leaping. It was like that old movie "Fame." I felt sick, tried to focus on the student murals my parents had pretended to admire. The lockers are all painted by students, too. It's a big competition, of course, and there are stories of the most famous lockers ever, like Sophie Armaria's. She graduated 10 years ago but people still reminisce about how she painted herself naked on her locker, in thick, glistening oil, so that the combination dial was one of her nipples.”

The complication here is that Judy is a little person - all of three feet, nine inches tall. In the novel, Judy's size functions as both reality and metaphor. Practically speaking, being a dwarf affects Judy's every social encounter and makes the whole high school ordeal harder. For the average-sized reader, however, Judy's size is an intensified version of the alienation that all of us who were marked as different - by accent, class, weight, acne, sexual preference, shyness, you name it can remember.

Things seem to go surprisingly well for Judy during her first months at Darcy. She bonds with a couple of other outsider girls: Molly, one of the few African-Americans at the school, and goth Sarah, whose dyed, oily black hair and piercings - Judy describes her as looking riddled by bullets - mask a sweet personality.

Judy lands a showcase part in the fall show and even picks up a boyfriend of sorts, Kyle, a standard-sized hottie. Maybe her parents' anxious hope that she'll become popular with the rest of the kids - or, as Judy wryly puts it -become a beloved Lilliputian among the Brobdingnagians, has actually come true.

But, sadly, we readers know it ain't so. We know because Judy is telling us her story retrospectively, in hiding, from a dump called The Motel Manor on the edge of town. The press is looking for her, and so are her parents and friends. Something really, really horrible happened to Judy at Darcy Arts Academy; something that makes this novel's acknowledged forerunner, Stephen King's "Carrie," read like a mere drop in the bloody bucket of teen humiliation.

"Big Girl Small" is not flawless. Just as Judy can't imagine a life beyond her current miserable state of suspended animation at The Motel Manor, DeWoskin can't seem to figure out how to give her novel an ending that's of a piece with Judy's harsh experiences and her resilient response to them.

The ending that DeWoskin supplies here is too pat. But, apart from that disappointment, "Big Girl Small" is a distinctive addition to the already packed cosmic library of coming-of-age stories. As DeWoskin's novel wistfully reminds us, the destruction-of-innocence plot never gets worn out because the ways in which innocence can be destroyed are apparently infinite.

Maureen, Corrigan. "NPR.org » 'Big Girl Small': Humiliation, High School Style." *NPR.org*. Fresh Air, 11 May 2011. Web. 12 May 2011. <http://m.npr.org/news/Books/136150038?singlePage=true>.